

Individual Racism and Institutional Racism

Hi my name is Kim Mitchell and this is the 8th principle minute.

Unitarian Universalist around the country have committed to dismantling racism beginning with their own practices, their identity and their own stories.

We speak about institutional racism and individual racism in our work here. Perhaps it's time to define them clearly and place some focus on why we must address institutional racism.

Individual Racism is when a person believes themselves to be superior to others because of the color of their skin or their ethnic background. Institutional Racism is when resources, power, and opportunities are distributed such that certain groups benefit more than others based on skin color or ethnic background.

Examples of Institutional Racism can be found in almost every aspect of our society. Perhaps the most visible, is the criminal justice system.

- Laws criminalize the behaviors of BIPOC communities, while minimizing analogous behaviors of white communities, such as the disparities in how marijuana and alcohol offenses are treated and the differentiation between crack and cocaine.
- Policing policies such as stop and frisk and broken glass policing target communities of color.
- The cash bail system that favors people with the means to post bail. Bail is supposed to ensure appearance trial but is actually used as a punitive measure.
- Once charged there is an imbalance in trial. Diversion disproportionately favors white people, plea agreements as a means of avoiding jail time result in convictions of innocent people, and a lack of access to adequate counsel is pervasive in disadvantaged communities.
- There is a large imbalance in sentencing, with BIPOC more likely to receive harsher sentences for similar offenses than white people do.
- Effective post-incarceration support structures are often less available to BIPOC.
- The relative racism of individual actors, from legislators, to the police, to the lawyers, judges, and juries, to those managing the prisons and to the parole officers, housing providers, and potential employers, are irrelevant. Individual acts of anti-racism cannot overcome the momentum of the institution.
- And, perhaps most important today, the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, police use violence against communities of color without fear of any consequences.

A little closer to home, there is racism in Congregational Life in most denominations, including leadership selection, decision-making, location, and funding model. None of this speaks to the demographics of the congregation; an all white congregation can be institutionally anti-racist and a diverse congregation can be institutionally racist.

The bottom line is that Institutional Racism or Anti-Racism Overrides Individual Racism. An institution can be racist even if all members are engaged in anti-racism work. However, if an institution is constructed to be anti-racist, mechanisms of the institution will address any racist acts by members of the institution.

Together we will continue to educate ourselves and discuss what it means to develop a culture of being accountably anti-racist and how we can work towards dismantling racism in our congregation.

References

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